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AUTHOR Bowie, Bernadette
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ABSTRACT

Globally, the increasing breakdown of economic systems is resulting in decreased government responsibility for health, welfare, and education and is placing growing demands on communities. Government policies in Australia are moving toward self-managing schools that require strong community support and involvement. On the other hand, some policy statements suggest that self-managing schools must possess a degree of specialization in administration and curriculum delivery that depends upon a minimum size. The implication is that efficient self-managing schools must either be large, autonomous, and self-directing in administrative and educational arenas, or belong to a conglomerate of small schools linked in an organizational network. This paper argues that small rural schools have unique community-school links that may be destroyed when operations are combined with those of other small schools. However, the alternative of school closure can devastate the small rural community. Case studies of four small rural schools in Victoria (Australia) examine their relationships with their communities, the loss of teachers and school support services due to mandated staff reductions, community tensions and fears of school closing, and cultural and social issues affecting community responses to externally imposed change. Contains 10 references. (Author/SV)

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THE IMPACT OF CURRENT POLICY TRENDS IN EDUCATION ON RURAL COMMUNITIES AND THEIR SMALL SCHOOLS

Bernadette Bowie - Australia

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THE IMPACT OF CURRENT POLICY TRENDS IN EDUCATION ON RURAL COMMUNITIES AND THEIR SMALL SCHOOLS

Bernadette Bowie — Australia

ABSTRACT

Globally, we are witnessing an increasing break down of economic systems, resulting in decreased government responsibility for health, welfare and education and increased demand on communities. Government policies in Australia are moving toward self managing schools that require strong community support and involvement. Current policy trends suggest that self managing schools will possess a degree of specialisation in administration and curriculum delivery that seems to depend upon a certain minimum size. The implication is that efficient self-managing schools will either be large, autonomous and self directing in administrative and educational arenas or conglomerates of small schools with a formal network of organisational linkages. In addition, self managing schools will be expected to establish strong community-school links. This paper puts the view that small rural schools have, in general, unique community-school links that may be destroyed by being forced to combine operations with other small schools. The alternative of school closure can devastate the small rural community. The paper examines four small rural schools in Victoria and examines the nature of their community-school partnerships. It describes the impact of policy changes on these communities. It suggests that policy planners need to be aware of the importance of the school to the small rural community.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in world economic markets and social patterns are putting new demands on education systems and the explosion in information technology has allowed the rate of change to those systems to be accelerated. Globally, we are witnessing an increasing break down of traditional economic systems, resulting in decreased government responsibility for health, welfare and education. Governments experiencing economic shortfall are trying to maintain and improve services for less money by increasing the demand on communities to support these areas of greatest public expenditure. Policy making in them is becoming increasingly politicised. Melbourne University's Professor Hedley Beare told The International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement held in Melbourne in January of this year that "Education policy-making has been taken out of the hands of the providers and increasingly put in the hands of those who understand economics, politics and business."

Government policies in Australia are moving toward self managing schools that require strong community support and involvement. The 1994 Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement gave a clear message that "managerialism is on the ascendancy." (Education Age 11/1/94p 20) At the same congress, West Australian Professor Judith Chapman emphasised the increased demand on communities. "In a competitive environment it is claimed market pressure will work to force the school to use its resources in the most economically efficient way and to develop the educational product in accordance with consumer preference....(However) the ideology of the market has led to certain conclusions. Chief of these is the notion that responsibility for the resourcing of education services should move away from the state and towards individuals functioning as buyers in the education market." These driving changes are demanding greater parent and community support in schools."

In Victoria, a major problem being experienced by educators is the rate at which change is being made. This has had a strong impact on small schools and their communities, as shown in the four case study schools in this paper. Moves toward self management have been taking place in Victoria over the past eight years. Reorganisation of the education system had led to the formation of districts which were asked to formulate solutions to the conflicting problems of providing quality education and reducing expenditure. Small schools had been targeted as economically inefficient. In October 1992 the Government changed and the process was speeded up considerably. Many schools were closed before the end of the year. The closures were preceded by a climate of rumour and uncertainty which affected confidence in small schools. Between 1985 and 1992 thirty five small primary and thirty three small secondary schools were closed which included fifty five at the end of 1992.

Shortly after election the new Victorian Government announced its Schools of the Future Proposal. From the preliminary proposals the future of small schools was cast in some doubt. "The Schools of the Future Proposals suggests that self managing schools will possess a degree of specialisation in administration and curriculum delivery that seems to depend upon a certain minimum size. The implication of this is that efficient self-managing schools will either be large, autonomous and self directing in administrative and educational arenas or conglomerates of small schools with a formal network of organisational linkages. In addition, self managing schools will be expected to establish strong community-school links." (Waterworth & Bowie 1993). During this same period the Minister announced that employment numbers in education would have to be cut significantly. The Government introduced and actively promoted Voluntary Separation Packages (VSPs). Staffing entitlements reduced and school principals were asked to name teachers in excess of the school entitlement. Teachers named in excess were placed in an excess pool and used to fill short term vacancies. New teachers were offered employment contracts for the school year as opposed to the calendar year.

In this climate of rapid change and budget reductions a range of school programs were put in doubt for the following year, 1993. Among those affecting small schools were shared specialist teacher programs and the mobile resource centres. A new policy was issued outlining how schools and the Department of School Education would examine current arrangements for curriculum and facilities and many schools were placed in Task Force groups to do this. An outcome of the Task Force process was the closure of 159 schools, with many schools annexed or merged, at the end of 1993. The policy document stated, within its three main justifications for its development, that " In rural areas, significant improvements to transport, roads and communications mean that many communities are no longer isolated as they once were." It also stated in this brief justification that "The consolidation of schools will lead to an extended period of stability, more viable schools and better provision of curriculum facilities." The implications that small school communities drew from the document was that small rural schools were likely to be at risk of closure or amalgamation. In the implementation of reorganisation and the accelerated move to self managing schools, three main policy trends can be discerned. a) the more economical use of scarce resources b) a move toward consolidation and c) an ambivalent emphasis on community.

SMALL SCHOOLS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

This paper puts the view that small rural schools have, in general, unique community-school links. "School-community links are important, and improved links between schools and communities should be encouraged regardless of urban or rural location. In rural Australia, however, the links between school and community are particularly important and the interdependence is likely to be greater than in metropolitan areas. In provincial, and more especially, remote areas, the school is often the focal point of community life, as well as being important to the local economy. Likewise, the community can, and often must, contribute greatly to the work of the local school in order to improve the quality of schooling " (Australian Schools Commission, 1987, p. 22). Brown and Maisey (1980, 77) describe small schools "as prime examples of community involvement and suggest that they would make natural laboratories for community involvement in schools."

Small rural schools are generally vital to their communities in social and cultural terms, providing meeting places, sporting facilities, social and cultural functions and resources that support community educational purposes. The school involves the community in debate about educational issues and promotes community interest and a sense of community pride. The school also often employs local people and uses local trades people as well

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as spending money in the community. The location of the school in the community can determine travel patterns which support local trade. The school, as symbol of the small community, helps to maintain confidence and, conversely, its closure causes loss of community confidence and is often perceived as the symbolic end of the community. The teachers bring new ideas and skills to small communities and often influence the community beyond the school.

The Commonwealth Schools Commission Report of 1987 stated that "this position leads the Commission to take the view that school systems should keep small rural schools open, wherever possible, and that they should maintain and where feasible, even extend the network of schools throughout rural Australia." OECD research indicates that there is also a significant relationship between the strength of community involvement in the school and the definability of the community. When geographic integrity is put aside and children are brought together from other school communities, the level of involvement of parents at the consolidated school is considerably reduced (1980, 12) This vital school-community relationship may be destroyed by the schools being closed or forced to combine operations with other small schools. The rate at which change is applied to small rural communities can also damage community involvement. Small rural communities are traditionally conservative and generally monocultural which makes their resistance to change stronger. Any increased burden is spread over a relatively small number of community members or staff and it may take more time for new responsibilities to be accommodated and skills developed.

THE CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

This paper examines four case study schools in Victoria and describes the nature of their school-community relationship. It examines the impact of policy and describes some responses that the schools made to change and the rate of change. The author stresses that the policy budget cuts should be seen as distinct from the implementation of self management in schools. Both, however, are economically driven, particularly the rate at which self management is being implemented.

THE FIRST CASE STUDY SCHOOL

This is a small rural school, over one hundred years old, close to urban areas. The majority of families in the school community are located locally on farms, farmlets or large bush blocks. About one fifth of the families (four) come from nearby urban areas (up to 12 km. distance) and by pass large schools to bring their children to the small school . Some families have a long history of involvement with the school. The school grew to a three teacher school 16 years ago and maintained that entitlement until 1994 when it became a two teacher school. The school has been characterised over the last fifteen years by stable staffing, strong leadership and the active promotion of the school community relationship by school staff. Community involvement in the school is very strong and the school has a major role in communication in the district. It publishes a weekly newsletter for the school community and a monthly community version is delivered to every household by the local fire brigade. Many community groups and members use the school and its resources. The community is actively involved in curriculum support, fundraising works and maintenance.

The changes in policy impacted on this school in many ways. Rumoured at risk of closure in late 1992, the school survived following a vigorous campaign from the local community. The shared music specialist experienced a distressing period of uncertainty when the shared specialist entitlement for 1993 had been in doubt. This teacher had a number of years experience in small schools and had developed a high quality program in the three small schools which shared her as a specialist. Uncertainty increased about the future of her position. Rather than be placed in excess she applied for a voluntary redundancy package at the end of third term and was replaced by a casual replacement teacher.

The local School Support Centre closed during 1993. However, it was not used greatly by staff at this school, with the exception of the Visiting Teacher Service which supported two physically disabled students. This service was relocated and maintained active contact with the school. School support curriculum specialists were valued highly by school staff but the school had experienced a long period of stable staffing and curriculum programs were well developed. The head teacher's networks were affected by the staffing reductions and reorganisation but the length of time that the head teacher had been in the school ensured that they were extensive and this did not affect the school as much as the other case studies.

During 1993 the school was placed in a task force. The head teacher asked two community members to be the community representatives. Neither of these persons was on school council but was subsequently seconded to it. The school council accepted these representatives and thus the burden on the existing school council members was considerably less than in case study school number two since there was a broader distribution of responsibility. Despite efforts by the head teacher to minimise impact on his school community there was some loss of confidence in the community about the future of small schools. This affected the enrolment for the following year. Toward the end of 1993 it became apparent that the head teacher would have to name one of his two staff in excess. He expressed disillusionment with the changes being implemented and the rate of change. The head teacher and the infant teacher both applied for, and took, voluntary separation packages at the end of 1993. The middle school teacher, inexperienced at administration, took over as acting head teacher in 1994. The resignation of the long serving head teacher undermined confidence in the school community. Enrolments dropped by about 30%.

In January 1994 the new head teacher was given a list of teachers who had been placed in excess. He employed one of these teachers as the second teacher. This teacher worked for five school days and then became ill. She did not return to the school until the commencement of second term. The shared specialist entitlement was also in doubt at the commencement of 1994. Faced with numerous new responsibilities, the new head teacher delayed contacting other small schools to arrange sharing a specialist. By the time he did all other small schools in the district had filled their entitlement. He applied for the LOTE teacher, who worked in the school under a school council agreement, to be employed as the shared specialist entitlement for 1994 (this had reduced from 4 to .2) and this was arranged about four weeks into the school year.

The new head teacher is building networks for administrative support. A valuable network for this is the Head Teachers Association which shares small school concerns and is able to disseminate and clarify information relevant to small schools. This group has been formed by head teachers in response to the changes being thrust upon small schools. Another network which the case study school has joined is a cluster of five small schools in the area who will bring staff together for policy and curriculum development. This initiative has come from two small school teachers in the area. The case study school has also joined a larger sporting association and will combine with both small and large small schools in the district. This will increase the ability of the teachers to build networks.

The school council voted in 1993 not to join the Schools of Future Program. As information became available school community members expressed concerns about the level of expertise that may be demanded from school communities. In 1994 school council members expressed the view that the school would be more vulnerable unless it agreed to take part in the Program and school council voted to do this. The school will be part of the intake for 1995. The atmosphere of rapid change has been difficult. The school community strongly associates all changes and cost cutting with the Schools of the Future Program. They express concerns about a sinister motive which is aimed at small schools. Had the rate of change been slower, the ideas of self management may have been approached more positively by the school community.

THE SECOND CASE STUDY SCHOOL

This school is set in a small rural community bordering urban areas and has been a two teacher school for many years, although in 1992 it increased for the year to three teachers. The school is more than 120 years old. It is the only remaining community building or institution that identifies the district for which it is named and is surrounded by farms. The school experienced rapid growth some twenty years ago with the development of a housing estate five kilometres away This increased teacher numbers to five for a few years until a large school was built on the estate. However, some families on the estate have preferred to send their children to the small, rural school and this has led to a distinct dichotomy in the school community. About half of the students now come from farms or farmlets close to the school and the rest live in an urban environment on the estate. There is strong community involvement in the school by both groups. For many years, until recently, the school had a male head teacher and there was expressed preference for this.

In 1991 a female head teacher was appointed and this led to expressions of concerns from a few parents from the conservative rural group. The school community has regular working bees and there is a pride taken by the community in the appearance of the school. Support in the school has tended to be divided into traditional male female roles and there is a mothers' club which oversees fundraising. The school council, occasionally termed the fathers club, has been traditionally made up of a majority of male parents but this is changing. The school community comes together for the annual concert and some social events. Parents are involved with reading, the swimming and sports program, excursions and computer studies. On a school day parents are seen walking casually in and out of the school buildings arranging fundraising, assisting with school programs, warming pies or just calling in for coffee. They convey a sense of a ownership of the school and there is family atmosphere among the students.

Towards the end of 1992 rumours of threatened closure encouraged the teachers at the school to strike to bring publicity to the school. They joined a state-wide strike on the 9th of November. The reaction from some of the more conservative rural group was to condemn the action of the teachers. Strong support, however, came from the urban group and this tended to factionalise the community. Tension within the community grew, as did criticism of the head teacher. This teacher was an experienced administrator and sought to inform and educate the school community about the implications of policy change and the shift in responsibility. Some members of the school community saw this as an abrogation of responsibility by the head teacher. The rapid rate of change had not allowed sufficient time for some members of the school community to accommodate the concepts of shifting responsibility.

This climate of rapid change, coupled with the amount of information that was being directed towards school communities, created uncertainty and tension within the school community. Threat of closure took its toll on parent confidence in the future of the school and the number student numbers reduced. As a result, the third teacher entitlement was lost early in 1993 and the head teacher was asked to name one of her two staff in excess. The teacher placed in excess suffered considerable loss of morale applied for and took a voluntary redundancy package later in the year. She criticised the rate at which change that had been forced upon the school and commented that it had contributed significantly to dividing the small school community. The teaching burden and administrative burden increased on the head teacher.

Reduced enrolments and the loss of the third teacher heightened tension as the school was seen as increasingly at risk. Had the changes been slower and the community given more time to accommodate them, tension would have been reduced. Within the school council meetings there was strong opposition to a works program proposed by the head teacher. Some members of the school community feared that applying for funding would increase the risk of closure. This led to further loss of cohesion in the school community and morale was very low among staff. In the first term of 1993 the head teacher applied for a voluntary redundancy package. The Ministry responded immediately and refused a request by the head teacher to finish the term. The head teacher was given a week to leave. The Infant teacher was offered the head teacher position but rejected the offer due to the tension within the community and the increasingly complex administrative burden. The position went to a teacher who had been placed in excess and was inexperienced at administration. This teacher was from an urban school setting and had no networks with other small school staff.

At a time when the staff needed maximum support, support services were considerably reduced. The local School Support Centre closed. Staff who were relocated at schools were difficult to access. Support networks were considerably depleted by loss of expertise through the number of Voluntary Redundancy Packages being taken. The local School Support Centre which had been providing valuable support in school-community relations, closed and some staff were relocated at schools. The regional centre, where the incoming head teacher had some networks, closed and new networks had to be established. Administrative burdens increased and the school community became involved. Much of the administration work was taken on voluntarily by members of the school council, increasing the burden upon them.

The school was placed in a task force in 1993 and this heightened the fear that closure was imminent. Community meetings were held and members of school council were finding themselves attending many meetings to develop strategies for survival and prepare their response to the Task Force. Fear of closure affected the morale of the whole school community and the teachers reported the effect was reflected in the classroom. A small number of children who were exhibiting problems were later, in fourth term, taken out of the school part-time and given private tutoring. In 1993 the .4 shared music specialist, the same specialist mentioned in the previous case study, applied for and took a Voluntary Separation Package in response to the pressure of changes. In 1994 the shared specialist entitlement was reduced from .4 to .2 under new staffing ratios. In 1994 the school linked with four other small schools in a shared specialist programme which, although halved in time, has established a wider network. The network gained from a shared specialist program is one of the most valuable that a small school can have because it opens channels of communications between schools and individual teachers. It gives some of the same benefits of a large school staff.

School communities were asked, in 1993, to discuss and vote on their school joining the Schools of the Future Project. The rate of change that had occurred had imposed greater burden on members of school council than would have occurred otherwise. This undermined the confidence with which the school community discussed the increased responsibilities implicit in the Project and several members of the school community expressed fears in this regard. This affected their approach to the self-management issue. Two valuable members of the school council left the school community sooner than would have been expected and school community members expressed the view that this had been, at least in part, due to the tensions and work load imposed by the rapid change. This may lead to a reluctance by members of the school community, to take on positions on school council. The school survived the Quality Provision Task Force which recommended that it stay open. The community voted to become part of the School of the Future Program in 1995 after much debate in school council and an earlier unanimous rejection of the proposal. Members of school council expressed fears that if the school did not join, it would be vulnerable to closure.

THE THIRD CASE STUDY SCHOOL

The third case study school is a one teacher school located in a small timber settlement. The small settlement has a small store which is opened for part of the week and the nearest town is 25 km. away. The school community is considerably, economically disadvantaged. There is a history of three generations involvement with the school among some of the families.The school has enjoyed the support from the nearby mills and one mill provided a free bus for the school for all excursions. Although one wider community member was involved in the school teaching art in a voluntary capacity, community involvement in the school was

unusually weak for a rural school. Most parents displayed a reluctance to be involved in the decision making processes being demanded of school communities and the school council had tended to "rubber stamp" policies drawn up by the teacher. The teacher of 1992 reported that no-one in the community was interested in sitting down and reading a curriculum or school policy with him. This teacher travelled to the school on Monday morning and left on Friday afternoon of each school week.

The teacher of 1993 settled in the community for the year, and the effect of this was apparently far more positive. The teacher did much to generate community-school interaction but much of this was running self-esteem programs and establishing support systems for the mothers of young children. The teacher produced a community newsletter through the school, called community meetings in the school, began to involve a small number of people actively in policy making and exhibited considerable entrepreneurial skills in gaining local government funding for community works and maintenance. However, this teacher reported that the majority of the community would only become involved in works in the school if they were paid to do it. There was a prevalent attitude that the school was the Government's responsibility, not that of members of the community However, the school was also viewed as the heart of the community and most community social activity, limited though it was, took place there. The school community spoke of the school in terms of it defining and ensuring the existence of the community.

It could be concluded that the Region would be likely to recommend closure in early 1992 and this had generated a fierce opposition by the community. The teacher of 1992 helped direct the efforts of the community and the school stayed open. However, this teacher expressed the view that the Region would continue to actively consider closure of the school. He also expressed the personal view that the school should stay open because of the importance of it to the community. Because community involvement in school council was limited, the first major effect of policy change was felt by the teacher in 1993 and was the loss of the School Support Centre and break down of support networks. However, the Country Education Project (Victorian division of the Federal Country Areas Project) networks were unaffected and had been the greatest source of support for the teacher, apart from networks with other small schools in the area. The teacher expressed the view that the major value of the CEP network was that it was more positive and less judgemental than perhaps other support services. The school was placed in a task force in 1993. Despite having enrolments for 1994 in excess of minimum requirement, the outcome of the task force process was the closure of the school at the end of 1993. The children were relocated to the school in the nearest main town, 25 km away and a school bus provided. Parents expressed grave fears about the hazards of the bus route, which was used heavily by timber traffic, and of the time involved in travel for the children, most of whom were lower primary age. At the commencement of the year two families had already moved out of the small settlement to areas where their children would have better access to schooling.

Both the teachers of the two previous years and members of the school community expressed the view that the closure of the school would lead to the community disappearing, as had another timber community 25km away, following the closure of its school a few years earlier. Of particular interest is the social significance of the school. The majority of the community represented a very distinct and clearly defined sub-culture of timber workers and their families. They had a long family history (over 100 years) of living in the general area. This group were itinerant timber workers, many employed casually or part-time by mills in the area. As a group they exhibited considerable socio-economic disadvantage. Faced with the closure of their traditional communities their community support structures were diminished and they tended to drift to the large towns of the region where they lived as fringe dwellers in less positive situations which did not offer the support of their own communities. The other school that had closed in recent years had led to rapid disintegration of that settlement. Following closure the same thing was happening to this settlement, and its post office branch was recommended for closure. The positive community activities that took place in the settlement in 1993 and which were centred in, and generated by the school, indicate that closure of a small school in an area of socio-economic disadvantage can have far reaching consequences that are not immediately obvious.

THE FOURTH CASE STUDY SCHOOL

The fourth case study school is in a remote, alpine setting. In 1993 it was a two teacher school with a student population of 20 children. It has strong leadership and community support. The area is mountainous and heavily forested and journeys of a relatively short distance can be quite long in terms of time. The nearest store is 30 minutes drive away and the nearest main town is an hour away from the school and two hours for some residents. Children from the school must choose to either go interstate to high school (an hour and a half each way on the school bus) or to take private transport to the nearest Victorian secondary school, four hours away. The isolation of the school is a major problem in relation to access to support services.

Until the end of 1992 this school had always been a one teacher school. The major industries in the area are farming and timber, and most families are from a farming background or work in associated service industries. The population is relatively widespread across the valley and nearby tableland, either on farms or in very small settlements, definable only be signposts, although one has a few houses and a store. The settlement in which the school is located has only a few farm houses and a fire brigade shed. Despite the dispersion of settlement, there is a strong sense of community which is defined by, and its future ensured by, the presence of the school.

There is a strong history of community involvement in the school and the school and community are mutually interdependent. The local hall is next to the school and there is no fence in between. The hall supper room is also the school library and area for the storage of school music equipment. The school is located on the Hall Committee land and, until recently, when a new modular building was brought in, the supper room was used as the school. The school is used by the wider community three night per week for people doing distance education programs using the school telematics to communicate with TAFE colleges. Secondary students also use the technology for language subjects undertaken by distance education.

The school is the centre and major focus of the local community. Parents assist with reading and in other curriculum areas and are constantly visible in the school. The school is beautifully maintained by the local community and is viewed by them as community property rather than Government property. Fundraising for the school draws the community together and is often integrated with social activities such as a wine tasting. Twice each year the school holds a cake stall in a small tourist town near the New South Wales coast. Community members travel up to four hours to reach this location and often purchase each other's cakes. The day is seen as an outing for the community.

Due to its isolation, this school was placed in a task force. Isolation is most likely to ensure the continuing existence of this school. Policy changes have impacted strongly on the school in spite of this. The head teacher and community are becoming increasing aware of the responsibilities that are being shifted toward the community. There is a steady stream of faxes, executive memorandums and correspondence arriving at the school, which is largely directed toward the school council as well as staff. The head teacher tells of the significant increase in time being spent at school council meetings interpreting these communications and the implications they contain. Although the community is well aware of the need to be informed, the extent of the information coming and the shift in responsibility is worrying them and they have expressed their fears to the head teacher. Because of the remoteness of the school, staff changes take place about every two years and the head teacher will probably leave the school at the end of this year so every effort is being made by this teacher to educate the school community to handle the new demands being put on them. Given the isolation of the post and changes in policy that are making small school positions less attractive, it is not

unlikely that the replacement teacher may be inexperienced in administration.

In mid-January 1994, the school council president was advised that the school would be able to keep both teachers of 1993. Up to this time the situation had been, because of a drop in enrolment from twenty to sixteen, and change in staffing entitlement policy, that the second teacher would either have to accept a point .2 position or part time staff would have to be found. The community was delighted with the news that they would retain their second and highly popular teacher in a full time position. This teacher had been under contract and was unwilling to continue in this mode. She had applied for numerous positions elsewhere and secured a private position on the day before school commenced. The head teacher requested a replacement and the response was that the school could no longer have two teachers because the wording of the agreement had been that the school could maintain their staff from 1993. Since one had left, the Ministry would not replace her. The head teacher secured a .2 shared specialist. This was, with vigorous lobbying from the community, increased to 3 and then .4 and by the third week of second term increased to .5

Due to isolation, support services from the Ministry had been difficult to access. This difficulty increased during the past 20 months for two reasons. The networks that the teachers had built up with personnel in support services were broken down by people taking the Voluntary Retirement Package (Voluntary Separation Package) and by the closure of the Support Centres. Some personnel were relocated in schools. However, it became increasingly difficult and time consuming to access these people. The teacher would phone the school at which a person had been relocated and ask for the person. Someone would have to go looking for them. This process is time consuming, a luxury in a small school. Most of the loss is felt in the curriculum support area. Other informal networks between schools and teachers have been affected as experienced administrators have taken VRPs at a rate far greater than natural attrition. Changes in Federal Government policy, however, have worked in favour of this school. CEP funding has increased significantly this year, due to changes in entitlement criteria. The school gains under the new formula on the grounds of isolation and socio-economic disadvantage. The funding under the Disadvantaged Schools Program has also increased for this school in 1994.

DISCUSSION

Self management and small schools. Policy makers, planning for self management in schools, face what may be seen as two contradictory tasks; to increase the quality of schooling and to decrease the expenditure on it. These contradictions give rise to the ambivalent emphasis on community. The case for self-management has been strongly argued in Australia and overseas (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988, passim). Its success will depend on strong community-school links and community support. However, the implication in the self management design in Victoria is that schools will be "large enough to warrant a scale of complexity of operation beyond that available, or even necessary, for the effective management of a small school. Moreover, this concept seems to imply that the principal of a school of the future will have the seniority and status enabling a certain degree of management specialisation and that he or she would be supported by a team capable of working a complex educational and administrative structure" (Waterworth and Bowie, 1993). Under this shadow, the future of small schools or the future of their autonomy, seems in doubt. If, as suggested in policy discourse, small schools cluster into conglomerates with a single form of leadership there will be a definite loss of autonomy. The ambiguity of the community emphasis in policy is obvious. To allow the school to be large enough to meet the self management model criteria, small school communities must be destroyed. Yet, to be successful as a self managing school, strong community support is essential.

Cultural issues affecting the response to change: Small rural school communities are by nature conservative and generally monocultural, making them more resistant to change than urban communities and they need more time to organise for and accommodate the burdens of change. The degree to which an administrator knows the community and encourages the spread of burden is important. In the first case study school the sharing of burden during the difficult period of the task force process meant less tension and insecurity in the school community than in case study two. In case study three the major burden fell on the teacher. This has some implications for the design of the information output, which has a cultural bias. The teacher in case study four, an isolated, rural community, reported 'a steady stream of faxes, executive memorandums and correspondence' arriving at the school and described extended hours in school council meetings interpreting these for the community. The discourse, if designed for an educated, urbane community may not be absorbed with confidence or clarity by members of other groups and will affect the enthusiasm with which the community becomes involved in the process of change. The task force process may have also favoured the more articulate and informed communities. The third case study school community may be seen to be disadvantaged by this. The first and second case study schools both had a highly skilled professional person as one of their two community representatives. Lack of empathy and information about the community's needs in case study three may have impacted on the outcome of task force process. The social and cultural importance of the school to this disadvantaged community might have been expected to merit far more support at the level of local, state and federal government than occurred.

In case study two, some members of the conservative rural group reacted unfavourably to the teachers' decision to strike. Some also questioned the leadership of the head teacher on the basis of gender. A few identified her attempts to explain the shift of responsibility toward community as a personal shift of responsibility which they felt characterised her gender. The communities of small rural schools are usually characterised by a far more distinct division into traditional gender roles than urban communities. There is often a prevalent attitude in the community that a male head teacher has more authority and is 'better able to handle the children'. The staff in case studies two and four both reported this attitude. The head teacher in case study four actively sought to alleviate fears in this direction by openly discussing the matter with the community. Community members reported being impressed with her communication skills and strength of character. It is likely that their rapid acceptance of her was also influenced by the isolation and difficulty of attracting a teacher to the position. While the community of case study four reported that the head teacher, who by necessity lived in the community, had a strong affinity for it, such a situation did not appear to develop in case study two where the teacher commuted daily from a suburban neighbourhood.

Case study two described a distinct dichotomy in the community which developed into factions as the pressure of change increased. The urban group was a less homogeneous group. In the face of rapid change, factions are often accentuated. One cultural group may be more receptive to change. During the task force process the leadership in debate in school council shifted perceptibly from the school council president, a local farmer, to the more articulate professional person from the urban group. Although highly committed, this school council president seemed to be intimidated by the discourse. He appeared despondent about the future of the school while the other parent appeared to remain motivated and optimistic. His despondency may reflect a disempowerment closely tied to the style of the discourse and perhaps to the cultural ability to accommodate change.

Social issues affecting the response to change: The effect of closure on the third case study school community is likely to be the disintegration of the community, as happened in the nearby school community of similar size and culture. The third case study community is representative of a disadvantaged socio-economic group. Social problems are best addressed within the support of a community situation. The movement of population out of the settlement will mean a loss of community support. Much of the support may have to be met by welfare services in large towns at a increased economic cost. The social effects of closure of a small rural school can be far reaching and long term

In an effort to reduce the major area of expenditure in schools, the Victorian Government has significantly reduced staffing numbers through active promotion of the Voluntary Separation Package. In case study schools one and two, both the experienced head teachers, two of the classroom teachers and the shared specialist took Voluntary Separation Packages. In case study school four the experienced head teacher of 1992 took a voluntary Separation Package. These schools are a small sample but the loss of experienced small school administrators and staff is of major concern. Inexperienced administrators replaced two of these head teachers. All the case study schools reported losses to their networks of valuable and experienced education staff who had taken packages. One head teacher reported "You are told so and so knows all about that, so you ring up. Then you're told, "Sorry, but he or she has taken the package"." There is a considerable drain of skills and information leaving the school system and there appears to be no filtering to prevent or offset this.

The policy of requiring schools to name teachers in excess of entitlement coupled with the Voluntary Separation Package has been lauded by some within the community as a means of 'getting rid of the dead wood". However, it can be seen that in many cases, the reverse occurs and valuable staff are lost. Further, it assumes, often erroneously, that being named in excess is consistent with being an inefficient teacher. If however, a proportion of teachers named in excess have been nominated for reasons of inefficiency, then the placement of these teachers to fill positions in small schools is unlikely to contribute to the well being of the school community. The issue of contract employment also affected one of these schools. New teachers to the system may be less motivated to develop an affinity for the local community if, by nature of their short term contract, they are employed for the school year only.

A final social issue is that of networks. School Support Centres were eliminated in 1993 and a reduced number of support staff relocated in schools. These staff members have often been hard to access by small school staff because of the demand for their services. Coupled with loss of staff to the Voluntary Separation Packages this has affected every case study school. It can be seen and is well documented, that the more extensive the networks of support, the greater the resources are for coping with change. Of greatest value to small schools are the networks formed with other small schools of similar size. They share similar problems and experiences.

Another valuable growing network for small schools in Victoria has been the formation of the Head Teachers Association which accesses and disseminates information relevant to small schools. It is clear from the case studies that small school communities and their school councils need support services to help them cope with change. The CEP offers much of this support and has established exemplary networks for school communities but only two of the case study schools are eligible. Small rural schools near urban areas do not qualify although their needs may be as great. This policy of exclusion may change. However, if CEP funding is spread further, the schools already funded fear diminished levels of valuable support.

CONCLUSION

As the processes of self management and reorganisation are implemented, policy makers and those implementing policy need to be aware of the importance of the school to small rural communities. They also need to be informed about the situation and culture of each school community. Closure of small rural schools can have severe economic and social consequences for the communities that are serviced by them. Consolidation undermines the valuable school-community relationship and viability of small rural schools is dependent on this relationship. If clustering is a necessity of self-management, then the feasability of maintaining the integrity and autonomy of individual school communities should be considered. Perhaps a loose federation of school councils could be established within a cluster. Alternately sub-council groups could be established in each school or some local decision making process left with each school. The quality of community support that is characteristic of small rural communities, is directly related to a sense of identity and autonomy.

Policy makers must consider the powerful role that networks have in supporting schools in a climate of rapid change. In planning staffing entitlements, the role of the shared specialist has in linking small rural schools should be taken into account. Support services need to promote the ability of small schools to access their services. Networks are needed by small school communities and their school councils to assist in the dissemination and interpretation of information, and the addressing of rapid policy change. The information discourse that interprets policy change to small rural communities needs to be accessible. It should be in plain and concise language that can be readily negotiated by a wide audience, so that community debate is encouraged and the community feels empowered to respond.

In responding to the necessity of reducing staff, educational authorities must look at means of filtering the flow of personnel moving out of the system so that valuable skills and information are retained. The willingness of many to accept voluntary retirement packages may be a reflection of the value that educators place on their work in a climate of rapid change. If teachers are seen as appropriate judges of quality in education then it may be that they feel disempowered or that the changes to the educational structure have not been accompanied by gains in the quality of educational provision. The direct and indirect losses being incurred by small schools will impact on their continued viability.

One of the consequences of closure of small rural schools is the damage to rural communities that has been discussed in this paper. There may be other ways that governments can retain social cohesion and support communities if closure occurs. However, the alternatives may be more costly to governments than the maintenance of the school.

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